



Two Sides of the Same Coin



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Have you ever heard the saying, “There are two sides to the same coin?” It means that there are two ways of looking at the same thing, or two different interpretations of something that has occurred. On the web page where you subscribed to this newsletter, there was a picture of the front of an 1861 \$20 gold piece. I asked you what you expected to find on the back. Obviously, it would have been the back of the selfsame gold piece. You probably discovered, however, that when you moved your mouse over it, there was instead the back of a £2 coin.

Everything about the front of the coin and the back was different: the country that issued it; its intended value, its actual value; even whether or not it was legal tender. Twenty dollar gold coins were in circulation in the United States until 1933 when Congress passed a law making it illegal for citizens to own gold. Twenty dollars in 1933 was a lot of money, about \$340 today; and their rarity combined with their high gold content makes each one worth more than \$1300. A British two pound coin, on the other hand is worth less \$4.00 at the current exchange rate.

My point is not to give you a lesson on the coinage of the United States and Great Britain, but rather to illustrate how easily our perceptions can deceive us. We interpret our experiences on the basis of what we expect. In our coin example, we interpret the value of the coin on the left to be worth about \$20 because we expect the back to say that it is a twenty dollar coin. We do not expect the other side to tell us that is only worth two British pounds. Suppose I had showed you the front of the two pound coin instead? Then your expectation would have been that the coin was only worth about four dollars.

We can be misled in the world of work just as we were by the two-sided coin. Managers can do one thing, but employees may see it as something else, and vice versa. The purpose of this

monthly newsletter is to explore some of the misunderstandings that come from these misperceptions.

Communication

So, for this first issue, I want to consider a topic that is high on the agenda of many managers. It is *communication*. What does it mean to communicate? Some will tell you that it means to tell someone something you want them to know. This is telling, not communicating, and I suspect that many of you will agree with me. Let me ask you a question: Knowing that telling is not communicating, how many of you actually put what you know into practice? When you're really busy – the phones won't stop ringing, or you're short of people, or the lines to the checkout snake all the way through the aisles – how often do you just tell your employees or your managers something without checking that they understood what you said?

Let me remind you of a familiar story. It is a story about four people named Everybody, Somebody, Anybody, and Nobody. Now I know that most of you will be familiar with this, but just to remind yourself of the details, read through it again. Now remember, there was an important job to be done and Everybody was sure that Somebody would do it. Anybody could have done it, but Nobody did it. Somebody got angry about that because it was Everybody's job. Everybody thought Anybody could do it, but Nobody realized that Everybody wouldn't do it. In the end, Everybody blamed Somebody when Nobody did what Anybody could have done.

This is a communication problem. In the aftermath, people might be heard to say, “I told you.” *Told* is the past tense of *tell*, and we all know that telling is not communication, right?

This story illustrates four specific problems, all of them steps within a process; but rather than thinking of this negatively, I want you to think of it positively. What would the correct behaviors be? What steps produce effective communication? I've organized the answer in the form of a mnemonic to help you remember. It is DIME. Think: this solution is a bargain. It only costs ten cents – just a dime for effective communication.

DIME – An Effective Process

D – Decide who is responsible. In our little story, “Somebody got angry . . . because it was Everybody's job;” but no one had decided whose job it was. In marketing, we say that if you

try to be all things to all people, you'll end up being nothing to no one in particular. The same thing is true in communication. You have to be specific.

Let's consider a real world example.

Those of us who have worked in offices have opened a window at one time or another. Whose responsibility is it to close it at the end of the workday? Is it the manager's, the cleaners', the person sitting closest to it, or the person who opened it? The answer is far from obvious. If it's the manager's, then whatever else that person has done during the day, he or she has to be in the office before going home to close the windows. Is it the cleaners'? Perhaps, though not every office uses cleaners every day or at all. Is it the person sitting closest to the window? We in the West are an individual lot, and many of us getting tired of undoing what others have done. Why should I close a window that I didn't open? So, it must be the person who opened it, then, right? Not so fast. The person that opened it may get off earlier than the person sitting next to it. This happened in an office where I used to work. The British civilians got off at 4.30, but the Americans worked until 5.00 pm. In any case, maybe the person who is last to leave would like the ventilation. On the other hand, maybe the person who is last to leave doesn't want to spend a half an hour everyday closing windows. You see the problem? Whatever your opinion, the manager must decide who's responsible. It can't be left to just Anybody.

I – Inform the person who is responsible. Yes; this is telling, and while telling by itself is not communication, it is an important part of it. This is why so many people act as if telling is communicating. They know that telling fits in the process, but they don't understand exactly how. This is also how deceptions are perpetuated. They contain a little bit of truth and, in this case, because telling is part of communication, many hope, especially if they are under pressure, that just this once, *telling* will be all that is necessary to communicate.

Some people believe that certain jobs are too trivial for them to do. This sort of thing is especially true in the public sector where there are implied privileges assumed with each job in the pecking order. While it may be an inappropriate use of someone's time to expect him or her to repeatedly perform work that requires a lesser degree of expertise than that for which that person is capable or is being paid, it by no means is an excuse for ignoring that work altogether. If it comes to it, it is better for *somebody* (e.g. a manager) to do it than for it

not to be done at all. For example, I have been in restaurants where the tables needed to be bused. All too often, the manager was nowhere to be found (probably hiding in the back doing paperwork) or was “chained” to the cash register. By comparison, ringing up orders might be sexier than busing tables, after all taking money from people is more fun than picking up their garbage; but if customers can’t sit down, then they can’t order food; and if they can’t get food, they have no reason to go to the cash register.

In our story, “Everybody was sure that Somebody would do it;” but no one was actually told. No one was informed that he or she would be held accountable; and you know as well as I do that if the job is considered trivial or is a little bit unpleasant or time-consuming, most people will assume it is *not* their responsibility. Managers often blame others for failing to perform something that they could have done. I’ve lost count of the number of times I’ve heard them complain about how there were no excuses for leaving the staff break room messy; but I can’t remember the last time I saw one wash his or her own cup, let alone anyone else’s. Consider this: What would happen if everybody assumed that somebody was the designated driver? So, “Everybody blamed Somebody” which didn’t solve the problem or doing anything to prevent it from happening again.

M – Measure. I’m using this word as a noun rather than a verb. The question is, “What is the measure? What is the standard?” if you like. Is it “yes” it was done, or “no” it wasn’t? Going back to our window example, does it mean all of the windows are closed and locked, closed most of the way, but left open an inch or two; that only the ones on the ground floor are closed, but the ones upstairs can be left open? It’s the manager’s responsibility to decide what that standard is, though I would encourage you to do this with the full consultation and agreement of those who will be affected by it. You are much more likely to get the kind of cooperation you want if you do.

E – Evaluation. How will you know if the standard has been met? In other words, what does success look like? If you don’t know, how will anyone else? You can’t evaluate success if you don’t know what the standard is.

You can see how poor communication results from the different perceptions of managers and employees. These are the two sides of the same coin. One tells; the other assumes he or she is

not responsible. One assumes a standard and measures success according to it; the other uses a different standard to determine what successful completion looks like.

It is essential that managers **D**ecide who is responsible, **I**nform the designated person; determine the **M**eaure to be used; and **E**valuate whether or not the task was accomplished according to that standard. Otherwise, **N**obody will do what **A**nycne could have done.